

The Role of Thai Families in Building Social Capital in the Era of Globalization*

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Abstract

This article examines the evolving role of Thai families in creating and sustaining social capital amid the forces of globalization. Traditionally, extended Thai families functioned as key agents of moral education, community engagement, and trust-building. In the modern era, despite changes in family structure, values, and communication patterns, families continue to adapt by supporting ethical development, fostering social networks, and participating in community life. The study highlights both the challenges and potentials of Thai families in strengthening social cohesion in a rapidly changing social environment.

Keywords: Thai family, Social capital, Globalization, Trust, Community

Introduction

The family is universally recognized as the most fundamental social institution, serving as the primary unit for socialization, value transmission, emotional support, and identity formation (Parsons & Bales, 1955). In Thai society, the family has traditionally played a central role in instilling moral values, maintaining social cohesion, and supporting community networks. It acts as the first environment where individuals learn to interact, trust, and cooperate, thus contributing directly to the accumulation of social capital—the networks, norms, and trust that facilitate collective action in society (Putnam, 2000).

However, the context of globalization has significantly altered traditional family structures and roles. Economic migration, urbanization, technological change, and the rise of individualism have redefined family dynamics in Thailand. As traditional extended families shift toward nuclear or even fragmented forms, the transmission of cultural values and communal trust is disrupted (Jones, 2012). Moreover, transnational influences brought about by global media and digital communication challenge the local foundations of identity, intergenerational relationships, and social obligations (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

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This transformation leads to a research problem: How do Thai families today contribute to or struggle with building and maintaining social capital in the rapidly changing global environment? The traditional functions of the family are being challenged, yet families may also find new ways to adapt and foster social connectivity through digital networks, education, and community engagement.

This article focuses on Thai families in both urban and rural contexts, considering variations across socioeconomic classes and generational differences. It adopts a sociological and anthropological approach to analyze the impact of globalization on family functions and their capacity to build social capital. The study also incorporates comparative insights from other Asian societies experiencing similar transformations to contextualize the Thai case within a broader regional framework.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a multidisciplinary theoretical framework that draws upon **Social Capital Theory**, socio-cultural understandings of the **Thai family**, and the **transformative effects of globalization**. These concepts collectively help explain how Thai families contribute to building social capital amid shifting social contexts.

1. Social Capital Theory

Social capital refers to the networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Three major theorists provide foundational insights:

- **Robert Putnam** (2000) emphasizes the role of civic engagement and communal networks in strengthening democratic societies. He distinguishes between "bonding" social capital (within-group cohesion) and "bridging" social capital (connections across diverse groups), both of which are relevant to family-based interactions in Thai society.
- **Pierre Bourdieu** (1986) conceptualizes social capital as resources embedded in durable networks of relationships, often tied to economic and cultural capital. Families, especially in hierarchical societies like Thailand, are primary sites where such capital is accumulated and transmitted.
- **James Coleman** (1988) sees the family as a central unit for producing social capital, particularly through intergenerational relationships, shared expectations, and obligations among members.

These perspectives underscore that families are not merely private units but also key producers and transmitters of the social norms and trust that shape broader society.

2. Concepts of Family in Thai Society

In Thailand, the family is traditionally viewed as a collectivist and hierarchical institution, characterized by strong interdependence, filial piety, and respect for elders (Mulder, 1996). It has served as the primary unit of care, moral instruction, and social integration. In rural areas especially, kinship ties are closely linked to communal labor systems, religious activities, and informal welfare networks. This cultural understanding positions the family as an essential source of both bonding social capital and moral authority.

3. Influence of Globalization on Family Structure and Role

Globalization introduces new cultural norms, economic pressures, and communication technologies that challenge traditional family roles. As economic migration increases

and global media reshape values, Thai families face fragmentation and role shifts—such as increased roles of women as breadwinners or youth disengagement from traditional expectations (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Nuclear families are becoming more common, and intergenerational cohabitation is in decline, weakening the traditional transmission of social capital.

4. Family Relationships and Building Trust, Cooperation, and Social Networks

Trust, cooperation, and networks are core components of social capital, and they are often cultivated within the family. Daily interactions, caregiving, and shared rituals foster emotional bonds that support the development of trust and reciprocity (Fukuyama, 1995). These relational dynamics extend beyond the household to communities—through kin-based support systems, religious participation, and community engagement—demonstrating how families serve as bridges between personal and public spheres of social capital formation.

This study explores how Thai families contribute to building social capital within a changing global context by drawing on Social Capital Theory, cultural understandings of Thai family structures, and the impacts of globalization. Social capital is defined as the networks, norms, and trust that support cooperation, with major theorists highlighting the role of families in cultivating both bonding and bridging ties. Thai families have historically been seen as collectivist and hierarchical, responsible for moral guidance, care, and social integration, especially in rural settings where kinship and religious networks reinforce communal trust. However, globalization has altered these dynamics by introducing new cultural values, economic shifts, and digital technologies that challenge traditional roles, reduce intergenerational cohabitation, and reshape expectations. Despite these changes, Thai families continue to play a crucial role in forming trust, promoting cooperation, and maintaining social networks through daily interactions, caregiving, and engagement in community life, serving as a vital bridge between the personal and public dimensions of social cohesion.

The role of the Thai family in the past in social capital

In the past, the Thai family played a foundational role in building and maintaining social capital through its structure, values, and relational practices. As the most intimate and immediate social institution, the family not only nurtured individuals but also served as a vital link between the individual and the broader community, transmitting cultural norms and facilitating cooperation and trust.

1. Traditional Family Forms

Traditionally, Thai families were extended and multigenerational, encompassing parents, children, grandparents, and often other relatives such as aunts, uncles, and cousins living within the same household or nearby. This structure reflected both Buddhist values and the agrarian economy, where labor was shared and roles were interdependent (Mulder, 1996).

Patrilineal kinship patterns were common, and family elders held authority and were responsible for decision-making, conflict resolution, and religious instruction. This hierarchical but interdependent arrangement ensured social continuity and emotional security, which are essential conditions for fostering bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000).

Families also operated as units of mutual aid, particularly in rural settings, where cooperative labor in farming or ceremonies—known as *phuen ban* or neighborhood support—relied heavily on kinship ties. These practices created strong social networks, interwoven with moral obligations and long-term reciprocity, which are hallmarks of social capital (Coleman, 1988).

2. Inculcating Values, Culture, and Community Relations

The Thai family was instrumental in the socialization process, teaching children core values such as gratitude (*katanyu*), respect for elders, modesty, and harmony—principles deeply rooted in Theravāda Buddhist ethics. Through storytelling, daily interactions, and participation in temple rituals, children learned not only religious teachings but also their social roles and obligations (Keyes, 1984).

Moreover, families served as mediators between individuals and the community. By encouraging participation in communal events—such as *boon* (merit-making) festivals, ordination ceremonies, and temple fairs—families fostered a sense of belonging and mutual responsibility. These cultural rituals reinforced collective identity and social trust, strengthening both vertical (intergenerational) and horizontal (peer-based) networks of cooperation (Fukuyama, 1995).

In essence, the traditional Thai family was a generator of social capital in its most robust form: a source of trust, cultural transmission, moral education, and community engagement. This legacy provides a contrast to the challenges faced by families in the era of globalization, where such roles are increasingly fragmented.

Changing Family Roles in the Era of Globalization

The Thai family has undergone significant transformations in response to the sweeping forces of globalization. Structural, cultural, and behavioral shifts have redefined traditional roles, weakened intergenerational bonds, and challenged long-standing mechanisms for cultivating social capital. These changes are particularly evident in family size, technological influences, and evolving value systems.

1. Family Reduction

One of the most visible changes in Thai society is the reduction in family size. Where once the extended family was predominant—especially in rural communities—modern Thai families are increasingly nuclear and geographically dispersed due to urbanization, migration, and declining birth rates (Jones, 2012). Young adults often leave home for education or employment in cities, leading to generational separation and a diminished role for grandparents in child-rearing and moral education.

This structural transformation disrupts the traditional support system, reducing opportunities for the intergenerational transmission of social values and weakening the familial networks that foster social trust and reciprocity (Coleman, 1988). As such, the ability of the family to serve as a generator of bonding and bridging social capital becomes more limited.

2. Role of Technology and Media

Globalization has been accelerated by advances in digital technology and media, reshaping how Thai families communicate, learn, and relate. On the one hand, technology has enabled families separated by distance to maintain connections via smartphones and social media. On the other hand, media saturation—particularly among younger generations—has exposed individuals to foreign values, lifestyles, and

ideologies that may conflict with traditional Thai norms (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

Moreover, digital devices increasingly replace in-person interaction, eroding shared family time, communal meals, and intergenerational dialogue. These changes reduce the affective bonds and communal trust-building that are essential components of social capital (Fukuyama, 1995).

3. Transformation of Values and Behaviors

Globalization brings not only economic integration but also cultural diffusion, leading to changes in Thai values and family roles. The rise of individualism, consumerism, and youth autonomy challenges the traditional Thai emphasis on collectivism, respect for elders, and community harmony (Mulder, 1996).

Children and adolescents, influenced by global pop culture and online platforms, increasingly prioritize personal freedom over familial obligations. This has led to value dissonance between generations and a weakening of social norms such as *katanyu* (gratitude and filial duty), which traditionally reinforced trust, cooperation, and interdependence within both the family and the wider community (Keyes, 1984).

Thai families as new social capital creators

Despite the pressures of globalization and social change, Thai families remain vital agents in the creation and renewal of social capital. While traditional forms of family support have diminished, families have adapted by fostering new forms of relational trust, civic engagement, and ethical development—bridging the personal and communal spheres in meaningful ways.

1. Building Vertical and Horizontal Relationships

Modern Thai families continue to play a key role in cultivating both vertical (intergenerational) and horizontal (peer-based) relationships. Vertical relationships, such as those between parents and children or grandparents and grandchildren, remain essential in transmitting norms, values, and emotional support. Even in nuclear families, moral lessons, discipline, and spiritual guidance—often rooted in Buddhist ethics—are emphasized (Keyes, 1984; Mulder, 1996).

Simultaneously, horizontal relationships are formed through siblings, neighbors, and peers, where values like cooperation, reciprocity, and mutual respect are reinforced. These relationships mirror Putnam's (2000) concepts of bonding (within-group ties) and bridging (cross-group connections) social capital. In many communities, Thai families actively maintain both types through school associations, religious activities, and shared economic enterprises.

2. Supporting Learning, Social Participation, and Ethics

Families are increasingly recognized as learning environments where children and youth develop social, emotional, and civic competencies. Beyond formal education, parents and guardians guide their children in understanding ethical conduct, conflict resolution, and respect for social norms. This aligns with Coleman's (1988) view that families are central to the development of human and social capital.

Thai families also promote social participation, especially through engagement in temple-based activities, local development projects, or community volunteering. These actions create opportunities for the younger generation to participate in society meaningfully, instilling a sense of responsibility, solidarity, and public-mindedness—crucial elements of social capital (Fukuyama, 1995).

3. Linkages to Community Strengthening

Families function as connectors between individuals and broader community structures. In rural and urban areas alike, households are key units in organizing community events, managing informal welfare systems, and promoting local identity. They help sustain social networks that are essential for community resilience, especially in times of crisis such as economic hardship or public health emergencies (Jones, 2012). Furthermore, families often lead initiatives in neighborhood associations, school committees, and religious foundations, reinforcing communal trust and shared values. These contributions mirror Bourdieu's (1986) understanding that social capital arises from embedded relationships that are mobilized for collective benefit.

Thai families, despite undergoing changes brought on by globalization, continue to play a crucial role in the creation and renewal of social capital by adapting to new social contexts through the development of trust, civic responsibility, and ethical values. They maintain both vertical relationships between generations and horizontal relationships among peers and neighbors, fostering norms of cooperation, respect, and mutual aid. These connections support emotional development and cultural continuity even within nuclear family structures. Thai families also serve as important learning environments, instilling moral conduct and encouraging social participation through religious, educational, and community-based activities. This contributes to the cultivation of responsible citizens who are actively engaged in public life. Additionally, families act as key bridges between individuals and broader community networks, often organizing or supporting local events, informal welfare systems, and collective initiatives. These activities strengthen communal ties and resilience, ensuring that families remain integral to the social fabric and to the functioning of society as generators of both bonding and bridging social capital.

Conclusion

Thai families, despite undergoing significant structural and cultural transformation in the era of globalization, continue to serve as essential agents in the creation and sustenance of **social capital**. Historically rooted in extended and interdependent kinship systems, Thai families were central to cultivating trust, cooperation, and communal responsibility through the transmission of cultural values and religious ethics.

In contemporary society, while traditional family forms have been challenged by economic migration, technological disruption, and shifting value systems, families have adapted by finding new modes of connectivity and participation. The reduction in family size and increased digital engagement have altered how relationships are maintained, yet families still play a critical role in fostering **intergenerational trust, ethical development, and social engagement**.

Through their evolving roles—whether as caretakers, moral educators, or community participants—families remain at the heart of both **bonding** and **bridging** social capital. They link individuals to broader networks, strengthen communal ties, and help sustain the social fabric in both urban and rural contexts.

Ultimately, the resilience and adaptability of Thai families highlight their continued relevance in shaping social cohesion and collective well-being. To support this role, policies and community initiatives should recognize and empower families as

partners in nation-building and social development amid the complex challenges of globalization.

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